

The electoral success of the Danish People's party: Something rotten in the state of Denmark?

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Eurocrisis in the
Press

By [Julie Uldam](#)

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Recently the Danes voted in a centre-right coalition led by the liberal party Venstre. Opinions polls had indicated a [close race](#), with a slim majority for the centre-right government (52.3 %). And that was indeed how it [turned out](#). Not too many surprises there. What did come as a surprise to the Danes and, not least, the Danish media was the success of the populist Danish People's party (DPP) who increased their share of the vote to 21%, up from 12% in the previous general election four years ago. With more than one fifth of the vote, this makes them the largest party in the right-wing bloc and the second largest party overall in Parliament. Even the leader of the Danish People's party Kristian Thulesen Dahl seemed a little stunned by this enormous success.



Kristian Thulesen Dahl, leader of the Danish People's Party

Founded 20 years ago around an anti-immigrant, anti-multicultural, anti-EU agenda, the DPP has been seen as appealing to the “grey vote”, because they propose to fund improved healthcare provision for elderly people by cutting spending on immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees. However, in this general election, the typical DPP voter is not necessarily 60+, but based in a non-urban area. The trend is clear in maps of voter distribution. The DPP was the largest party in three large non-urban regions, with more than 30 per cent of the vote in some areas. In the wake of the election, the Danish media have focused their analyses on this urban – non-urban divide.

The Danes are now – spurred on by the media – asking how such a small population (5.6 m) could come to see viable political solutions so differently. In urban areas people are asking how non-urban voters can be so bigoted, egotistical and narrow-minded. In non-urban areas people are asking how urban voters – and especially Copenhageners – can be so smug, complacent and idealistically politically correct.

Part of the answer may be that many people in rural areas feel overlooked in discussions and policies around the financial crisis. For example, the outgoing Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt recently proclaimed Denmark out of the crisis, even though the nonurban regions are still struggling with high unemployment rates as production jobs have moved to China and Eastern Europe.

But we also need to consider the media in our search for explanations. In the run-up to the election, the Danish media played a central role, by contributing to the simplification of the political agendas in the election campaign. Although the ballot list included ten parties and some independent candidates, Danish TV coverage centred on four live debates between the two main candidates. The coverage in print media was also characterised by front pages with images of these two candidates. This had two important consequences: (1) media coverage came to revolve around only very few issues, most prominently the economy, employment and immigration, and (2) other candidates – such as DPP's Kristian Thulesen Dahl – were never significantly challenged on their political programmes, and certainly not on other issues or the multiple ways in which they are interrelated. With an election campaign reduced to a simplified caricature, the DPP's vilification of immigrants was allowed to thrive and remain largely uncontested

in broadcast media. For voters who feel that urban elites and decision makers fail to recognise their continuing struggles with the Euro crisis, the DPP's nationalist scaremongering and promises of better welfare financed by curbing immigration and EU involvement might seem seductive.

Just as the two-candidate focus during the election campaign did not facilitate comprehensive political debate, in the wake of the election the media's focus on urban and non-urban divides is unhelpful. It invites people to construct caricatures such as the urban smug idealist and the non-urban simpleminded, selfish nationalist. Doing so pushes questions about shared interests into the background. It also masks the risks of a politics that may erode the Danish welfare state (that even [neoliberal media have lauded as key in responding resiliently to the financial crisis](#)) and – not least – the risks of welfare policies that are grounded in nationalist scaremongering rather than care and sustainable solutions.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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